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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceived student satisfaction and communication implications for those students living on campus at a mid-sized Southeastern regional university as a Residential College model was implemented. A total of 1,523 students completed anonymous surveys. The results indicated that the quality of the relationship the students had with the Resident Advisor directly influenced their perceptions of their living environment. Findings also suggest that freshmen had higher communication needs and consequent communication involvement than other classifications of students, and that relationship building is a very important communication concept for students. (Contains 18 references and 4 tables of data.) (EF)

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Don't Drop Out!: A University's Use and Evaluation of Residential Colleges and Their Impact on Student Satisfaction, Communication Implications, and Enhanced Retention

by

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceived student satisfaction and communication implications for those students living on campus at a mid-sized southeastern regional university as a Residential College model was implemented. The results indicated that the quality of the relationship the students had with the Resident Advisor directly influenced their perceptions of their living environment.

Many serious problems in undergraduate education have emanated from what sociologists term structural matters which are the ways institutions organize interactions among students, faculty, and administrators (Axelrod and Freedman, 1970, p. xi). Following the publication of A Nation at Risk, (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) American education came under strong criticism. An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993), and Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience (National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, 1997) are two recent examples of national reports which emphasized the need for colleges and universities to promote integrated learning experiences for students.

These academic and social integration initiatives have become essential parts of collegiate retention efforts (Tinto, 1987). In fact, "what Tinto is suggesting is that students who are more integrated into the academics as well as social aspects of university life are more likely to remain on campus" (Schuh and Tobin, 1994, p. 2). The notion of increasing and enhancing student integration into academic and social university life serves as a guiding tenet of many collegiate retention efforts, and one mechanism designed to increase retention is the Residential College system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceived satisfaction of the student body with the Residential College system at a mid-sized southeastern regional university and what specific aspects of the system contributed to the level of satisfaction found. Ultimately, increased student retention was the focus. The target audience was approximately 3,000 students who lived in the Residential Colleges.

In 1994, this university identified the Residential College system as a recruitment tool and as a means of increasing student retention. Schroeder, Mable and Associates (1994) argued that "Residential Colleges were the solution to knowledge transmission problems when higher learning left the monasteries at the end of the Dark Ages" (p. 241). Potentially, the Residential College system may provide the corrective model for higher education today as well as in the future.

Prevalent Residential College Models

In the United States, two systems were prevalent in the history of the Residential College system those at: Harvard and Cambridge. Harvard opened the first two Residential Colleges in the fall of 1930 as the Harvard House System (Jencks & Reisman, 1962, p. 731). Later, the arrival of women on campus which occurred after World War II, created a need for coeducational housing facilities at the large state institutions (Shaffer &

Ferber, 1965, p. 21). Even though Harvard served as something of a pioneer for the Residential College model, Cambridge was the first college to enjoy the success that made the Residential College system so reviewed by university housing departments all over the United States (Brooke and Highfield, 1988, p. 92).

According to Winston and Anchors (1993), "college residence halls exist to provide relatively low-cost, safe, sanitary, and comfortable living quarters; to promote the intellectual, social, personal, physical, career, educational, and moral development of those who live there; and to supplement and enrich students' academic experiences" (p. xix). Schroeder, Mable and Associates best characterized the traditional learning methodology as having created problems for colleges and universities: "Mass higher education in America can be delivered only by warehousing students on one side of campus and faculty and classrooms on the other, causing a type of schizophrenia for the institution" (1994, p. 242). Obviously, communication and relationship building between students and faculty suffer under this type of conclusion.

Fusani's Extra Class Communication Study

Hundreds of studies have focused on in-class communication in enhancing pedagogy, but few have taken into consideration the study of communication between the faculty and student outside the classroom or what Fusani termed "Extra-class" communication

(ECC) (1994, p. 567). Pascarella (1980) found that most early student-faculty informal contact studies were uni-dimensional. He subsequently proposed that future research include contextual and demographic factors, exposure (frequency), focus (content), and impact (quality and satisfaction) to delineate ECC behaviors and assess their importance in the collegiate experience (p. 567). The possibilities for research were numerous. Students, particularly women, valued instructor accessibility (Runco and Thurston, 1987). Runco and Thurston (1987) found that higher scores on tests in class during the extra class communication accounted for instructor sociability but not student grade expectations.

Tinto (1987) and his predecessors (e.g. Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hibel, 1979; Wilson, Wood, & Gaff, 1974) recognized ECC and its importance in the collegiate experience, especially regarding student retention. Tinto's model of student persistence focused on an institution's ability to mitigate between the two factors that inhibited both academic and social integration: isolation, "the absense [sic] of sufficient contact between individual and other members of the social and academic communities of the college" (p. 64) and incongruence, the "mismatch or lack of fit between the needs, interests, and preferences of the individual and those of the institution" (p. 53-54). Tinto (1987) further asserted that the

"degree and quality of personal interaction with other members of the institution are critical elements in the process of student persistence" (p. 64), and a lack of such communication is the "most important predictor of eventual departure" (p. 65).

Student Satisfaction

Astin and Fusani agreed on the importance of student satisfaction. Astin (1993) found that most of the recent research on higher education had overlooked the student satisfaction component even though student satisfaction with college life was largely affected by the size of the institution. Astin (1993) acknowledged the student's input as an important variable to research: "Given the consideration that students make a considerable investment of their time and energy, their perceptions of the value of that experience should be given considerable weight" (Astin, 1993, p. 273). In fact, "virtually all measures of satisfaction with the undergraduate experience are related to the number of years completed in the undergraduate program" (Astin, 1993, p. 278).

Astin (1993) discussed some of the different components which affected student satisfaction and included factors such as environment and the academic standards existing in certain fields of study. Likewise, Astin (1993) contended that the strongest negative effect on satisfaction was lack of student community. Satisfaction was negatively impacted by heavy

academic standards existing in certain fields of study because the student had no time to socialize or participate in non-academic endeavors (Astin, 1993). Clearly, a shift in the traditional higher educational environment could be warranted.

The Residential College System Model Used

The paradigm shift for this university's structure occurred in the fall of 1996 when the university decided to change the traditional focus from motivating students to spend time with the faculty outside the classroom to bringing the faculty to the students, so the interactions outside the classroom could occur. After examining the strategies used in the past at the University, the institution saw Residential Colleges as a way of repairing the perceived lack of student interest in university life.

The adopted system used tenured faculty members as College Heads. In each college, the College Head served, first of all, as the central promoter of its programming efforts. Additionally, the College Head was to be the liaison between the academic and the residential sides of university life, the two aspects which together created "the whole" university. The College Heads would attempt to merge the two halves of a "whole" university through programming, out-of-classroom interaction, and other strategies which they might devise. In particular, the adopted Residential College system counted on the faculty

members who served as College Heads to bring their special academic expertise into the residential settings, an element which had been missing with traditional Residence Directors alone.

Instrument

A 54-item scaled and short answer survey was distributed to all the students in each building to complete voluntarily during floor meetings in the fall, 1997 semester. The rating scale was based on a five point rating system from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Nominal measurement scales were used to determine the gender, classification and other demographic information on each respondent.

Procedures

Respondents were asked to complete the anonymous survey at a floor meeting and return it to the Resident Advisor on their floor or wing. The Resident Advisor submitted the surveys to the Resident Directors in each building. After the surveys were collected, they were given to the researcher for statistical analyses. One-way analysis of variance tests were conducted on the data to assess any statistically significant differences at the $p<.05$ level.

Demographic Results

With a total N of completed surveys equal to 1,523, over 60% of the respondents were female, and the freshmen dominated

with 43.9% completing the survey followed by the sophomores with a 31.3% response. Over 50% of the respondents had lived in the Residential Colleges or in on-campus housing for one to two semesters. The upperclassmen respondents made up only 24.7% of the total. Most of the student respondents (22.2%) spent at least one to two weekends per semester on campus as opposed to the 9.1% who spent nine or more weekends on campus. Over 85% of the students were familiar with their Residence Director, and 80.4% were familiar with their College Head. Most of the student respondents (22.6%) spoke with their Resident Advisor several times a day. The Resident Advisors were perceived as available and willing to help according to 48.7% of the respondents. Finally, students indicated they studied over 70% of the time in their Residential College room.

Summary of Statistically Significant Findings and Conclusions:

Residents who spoke with their Resident Advisor (Table 1), knew their College Head (Table 2) or Residence Director (Table 3), and utilized the offerings in their Residential College had a positive Residential College experience and felt a connection with the college. Additionally, freshmen (Table 4) tended to communicate more often with referents (desk staff, Resident Advisors, College Heads, Security Guards, etc.) because they may have had higher communication needs than did other classifications. Student connection with the university is one

of the overarching goals of the Residential College model, and communication is the tool to achieve this goal.

[Insert Tables 1-4]

The Residential College system is no doubt laden with communication implications; however, one essential communication concept was prevalent in that relationships were seen as important. In this study, the students responding to the survey seemingly placed great importance on relationship building. At the interpersonal level of communication, relationships were established between the students and the Residence Directors, College Heads and Resident Advisors. These relationships are important for student satisfaction and success.

Additionally, the ability to communicate at the interpersonal level allows humans the opportunity to co-orient their behaviors (Kreps, 1990). Following in Kreps' perspective, the Resident Advisors must keep in mind how important relationship building is for residents, especially the new freshmen who need a new, strong, reliable relationship to assist in their acclimation and identification with the university.

Co-orientation allows for the accomplishment of common goals (Kreps, 1990). If one cannot influence another to co-orient his/her behaviors, organization will not occur. As a part of the Residential College model, students' relationships with resident advisors, resident directors, and college heads

are crucial in making this vital connection with the university. The connections made with the university by the student allow for steps to be taken toward goal accomplishment, higher retention, and a higher level of satisfaction for the students.

Future Areas of Study

In the future, researchers who choose to delve into this concept further should conduct an analysis of any surveys that have been done to assess the perception of the students before the inception of a Residential College system as well as during and after the implementation of such a system. Similarly, researchers who decide to pick up where this study concluded should take a serious look at the role of the Resident Advisor and the impact that role has on the residents. The Resident Advisor may be the key to the student's relationship to the Residential College. In several instances, the Resident Advisor-student relationship shaped the student's perception of the Resident Director, College Head, rule enforcement, safety, maintenance response time, etc. However, to what extent do the characteristics of the Resident Advisor influence those perceptions?

Limitations

The buildings (residence halls) in which the students reside all have different aesthetic characteristics. Those aesthetic differences along with the student and staff makeup in

each college might impact the way students in the various colleges responded to the survey questions and or perceived their college.

In addition, this study included only students living on-campus, not the entire student body at the university, which potentially prevented a true representation for the University as a whole. Moreover, the students who were present during the inception of the Residential College concept in the Fall of 1996 may not have been captured in this study since some of those individuals had left the university before the survey could be conducted. In addition, some students had been at the university before the Residential College concept began and their opinions may have been swayed negatively if they did not want the concept to be implemented. Also, completion of the survey was optional to the students.

The fact that Resident Advisors distributed the survey could have been seen by some students as a threat to confidentiality. Furthermore, very few research articles have been published on the Residential College system, which made it difficult to obtain an historical perspective for this study. However, it is to be hoped that this current study will add to the body of knowledge on the Residential College system and serve as an aid to those who seek to conduct further studies.

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Table 1. Summary of Analysis of Variance Responses by frequency of Speaking with the Resident Advisor

Component Area	df	SS	MS	F Ratio
RA Availability (Q8)				
Between Groups	4	77.8586	19.4647	21.3055***
Within Groups	1502	1372.2263	.9136	
Total	1506	1450.0849		
Sufficient Programs (Q9)				
Between Groups	4	70.8355	17.7089	14.2966***
Within Groups	1500	1858.0176	1.2387	
Total	1504	1928.8532		
Helpful Desk Staff (Q11)				
Between Groups	4	32.2344	8.0586	7.3274***
Within Groups	1493	1641.9845	1.0998	
Total	1497	1674.2190		
Clean Public Areas (Q14)				
Between Groups	4	24.0309	6.0077	4.6101**
Within Groups	1498	1952.1541	1.3032	
Total	1502	1976.1850		
Know What To Do About Maintenance Problems (Q16)				
Between Groups	4	27.7443	6.9361	5.9128***
Within Groups	1498	1757.2497	1.1731	
Total	1502	1784.9940		
Adequate Fire Safety (Q19)				
Between Groups	4	15.9537	3.9884	3.3262*
Within Groups	1495	1792.6437	1.1991	
Total	1499	1808.5973		
Fair Regulation Enforcement (Q20)				
Between Groups	4	64.1858	16.0464	15.2929***
Within Groups	1497	1570.7603	1.0493	
Total	1501	1634.9461		
Noise Level on Floor (Q21)				
Between Groups	4	18.3327	4.5832	3.0517*
Within Groups	1489	2236.2456	1.5018	
Total	1493	2254.5783		

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Table 2. Summary of Analysis of Variance by Knowing the College Head

Component Area	df	SS	MS	F Ratio
Fair Regulation Enforcement (Q20)				
Between Groups	1	9.5305	9.5305	8.8351**
Within Groups	1474	1590.0116	1.0787	
Total	1475	1599.5420		
Noise Level (Q21)				
Between Groups	1	29.2333	29.2333	19.4692***
Within Groups	1464	2198.2155	1.5015	
Total	1465	2227.4488		

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Table 3. Summary of Analysis of Variance by Knowing the Residence Director

Component Area	df	SS	MS	F Ratio
RA Availability (Q8)				
Between Groups	1	6.5654	6.5654	6.8773*
Within Groups	1487	1419.5635	.9546	
Total	1488	1426.1289		
Helpful Desk Staff (Q11)				
Between Groups	1	14.4365	14.4365	13.0170***
Within Groups	1478	1639.1716	1.1090	
Total	1479	1653.6081		
Helpful Student Security Guards (Q12)				
Between Groups	1	7.4256	7.4256	5.9564*
Within Groups	1476	1840.0636	1.2467	
Total	1477	1847.4892		
Adequate Security (Q15)				
Between Groups	1	13.3921	13.3921	12.4763***
Within Groups	1485	1594.0040	1.0734	
Total	1486	1607.3961		
Fair Regulation Enforcement (Q20)				
Between Groups	1	9.0523	9.0523	8.3085**
Within Groups	1483	1615.7531	1.0895	
Total	1484	1624.8054		

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Table 4. Summary of Analysis of Variance by Classification

Component Area	df	SS	MS	F Ratio
RA Availability (Q8)				
Between Groups	3	15.8508	5.2836	5.5647***
Within Groups	1488	1412.8489	.9495	
Total	1491	1428.6997		
Sufficient Number of Programs (Q9)				
Between Groups	4	23.5745	5.8936	6.0852***
Within Groups	1502	1908.8409	4.6375	
Total	1506	1932.4154		
Helpful Desk Staff (Q11)				
Between Groups	4	22.4397	5.6099	5.0707***
Within Groups	1493	1651.7793	1.1063	
Total	1497	1674.2190		
Helpful Student Security Guard Staff (Q12)				
Between Groups	4	23.9914	5.9979	4.8735***
Within Groups	1492	1836.2283	1.2307	
Total	1496	1860.2298		
Adequate Fire Safety (Q19)				
Between Groups	4	18.3601	4.6362	3.8798**
Within Groups	1495	1786.4553	1.1950	
Total	1499	1805.0000		
Fair Regulation Enforcement (Q20)				
Between Groups	4	12.7332	3.1833	2.9378*
Within Groups	1498	1623.2003	1.0836	
Total	1502	1635.9335		

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

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